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## **Mothers influencing mothers: the use of virtual discussion boards and their influence on consumption**

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**Abstract:** Mothers represent a large segment of marketing dollars and traditionally, word of mouth was spread from mother to mother in a face-to-face environment, such as the school car park or mother's groups. As families have evolved, so too has the traditional mother's group. Limited academic studies have explored online mothers' groups and how they impact on consumption. In order to explore the nature of this online influence and how mothers are influenced by other mothers online, a study was conducted through the use of observation and qualitative questioning. The data suggests that trust between mothers is generally high and mothers tend to trust the opinions of other mothers when they recommend a product. This is similar in other reference group contexts, however, mothers are communicating about brands frequently and influencing behaviour. This leads to a number of managerial and theoretical implications discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** social media; online influence; reference group; family; mothers, word-of-mouth; virtual community.

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**Biographical notes:** Raechel Johns is an Assistant Professor in Marketing at the University of Canberra. Her main research interests are related to internet marketing, self-service technologies and technology marketing, including the use of social media and the impact of this on buyer behaviour and customer value. She has both a personal and professional interest in the consumption behaviour of families and how online behaviour influences this. She is widely published in a number of areas. Prior to her academic career, she was a Marketing Manager in the retail industry and then in IT and internet marketing.

Rebecca English is a Lecturer in Education at Queensland University of Technology. Her research interests are focused on parental choice. She uses Bourdieu, Bernstein, Appadurai and Hall as well as Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse these choices at a theoretical level. She is also interested in how ontology, ideology and philosophy influence parents' decisions for their children's education. She has published widely in professional and academic education journals as well as writing for blogs, magazines and online news-sources. Prior to her career as an academic, she was a secondary school teacher in both the private and public sectors.

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## 1 Introduction

With the internet infiltrating the daily lives of the majority in Western countries, it is not surprising that mothers are meeting online and sharing tips and recommendations, much like they did in traditional mothers' groups. Despite this, limited academic research has been conducted exploring how mothers influence other mothers online. As families change and evolve, non-traditional influences are increasingly providing a marketing-related impact from mother to mother. Furthermore, as many first time mothers are now older than they were in the past (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011), disposable income may be higher, and as a result, parents are spending increasing amounts on baby and child related products than ever before. The use of virtual communities for the dissemination of knowledge is known (Chiu et al., 2006) and it is acknowledged that men and women may utilise online communication differently (Gurak, 1999). While researchers have recently addressed the online communication of mothers (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013), this has not included the impact of this communication on consumption. Having an understanding of virtual communities can enhance knowledge of the digital economy (Ridings et al., 2002), therefore assisting organisations to develop an effective online strategy.

Although virtual communities are conducted through an electronic means, communities interact similarly to offline communities (Abdul-Rahman and Hailes, 2000) and therefore it is essential to have an understanding of how the reference groups online impact on consumption. As the traditional sources of advertising, television and newspapers reduce in influence and consumers require more control over media (Rashtchy et al., 2007; Vollmer and Precourt, 2008), social media has more impact and influence on consumers (Mangold and Faulds, 2009), particularly as users trust social media more than traditional media (Foux, 2006). Academic research has indicated the role of message boards or virtual communities in marketing. For example, message boards can be utilised by organisations to promote their brand message (Spaulding, 2010) and analysis of formal review sites have been conducted (Chen et al., 2011). The idea of 'herding' resulting in the rapid (viral) spread of online messages has been examined (Langley et al., 2013). Researchers have also examined message board use in various contexts, such as the reactions to recipients after receiving unsolicited messages (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008) and how discussion board lurkers differ from discussion board participants (Thompson et al., 2013). Researchers have also explored the use of message boards by mothers for parenting advice and support (O'Connor and Madge, 2001; Daneback and Plantin, 2008; Drentea and Moren-Cross, 2005, among others) however a literature search has indicated that no studies examine the use of these

message boards for brand communication between mothers. Due to the increasing importance of word of mouth through social media and the buying power of mothers, it is therefore essential to understand how social media users can influence mothers online. This paper addresses one key question: how does online influence impact on the shopping behaviour of mothers?

In order to make a contribution toward answering this research question, a qualitative study was undertaken with a group of mothers. In the first stage, observation of the mothers over a number of years was undertaken, using a netnography approach (Kozinets, 2010). For the second stage, researchers asked the mothers online about their shopping experiences and online influence. Responses indicate that there is considerable influence on mothers' shopping behaviour through online discussions with other parents. This paper makes a contribution toward the academic literature in relation to social media, family consumption patterns, reference groups and consumer-decision-making. Although some data is available in the media, it is not available in the academic literature. This paper makes a contribution by initially compiling some of the data available in industry-based studies. It then relates the concepts to some of the marketing theories about consumption, reference groups and consumer decision making. Finally, an analysis of the data is provided, from mothers discussing their online influences and shopping behaviour.

## **2 Motherhood**

A good deal of work on motherhood, and the intersection between the ideological and consumption work of mothers, exists in the literature on consumer culture. Principally concerned with the work mothers do to ensure they are positioned through the discourse of the 'good mother', this research (cf. Cairns et al., 2013; Afflerback et al., 2013; Katz, 2008) is concerned with the ways that mothers engage with their children and their peers to mother well. For example, Cairns et al. (2013) argue that the mother discourse involves the coming together of the concept of the good mother and the good consumer. They argue that good mothers consume a series of goods and services in order to manage the risks their children face in an uncertain future. They cite the work of Cook (2009) to argue that we cannot understand motherhood without understanding the commercial contexts in which motherhood is performed. Thus, they argue that the consumption practices of (especially middle class mothers) are a measure of good mothering. Similarly, Katz (2008) argues that the individualised nature of the production of the citizen, a project that begins in childhood, is enmeshed in a host of practices that involve "well resourced parents contributing to natural futures by investing in their children" (p.10). Thus, these studies suggest that mothers must know what to buy, in order to position themselves through the discourse of 'good mother'.

One of the communities that construct a series of discourses to position those mothers deemed to be 'good', including consuming the 'right' products, is the Attachment Parenting community. This community is associated with parenting 'intensively' (Afflerback et al., 2013), in the sense that mothers are expected to increase physical closeness and promote bonding while reducing separations. Afflerback et al. (2013) argue that the ideology of intensive mothering "holds mothers independently responsible for childrearing and accountable for ... their child's well-being" which includes making the

appropriate consumption choices for their children in order to reduce their harm (p.3). Much of the literature (cf. Faircloth, 2011) describes this Attachment Parenting philosophy as intensive. Concomitant to this is the argument, made by the mothers themselves, is that Attachment Parenting reduces risk. Mothers who follow Attachment Parenting are said to be endeavoring to tailor their consumption decisions to those goods and services that are safe and desirable (Faircloth and Lee, 2010; Faircloth, 2010; Lee et al., 2010; Faircloth, 2011).

It is interesting to note the link between mothers' work and cultural capital. Attachment Parenting is generally practiced by middle class parents who are highly educated and generally possess a good deal of highly valued institutional cultural capital. Institutional cultural capital involves cultural knowledge that is institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications (cf. Bourdieu, 2008). The theory of cultural capital suggests that good mothers have the capital to know which products are socially and culturally desirable to purchase because they understand what is socially desirable and are able to access the knowledge that is required to make socially desirable decisions (Shirani et al., 2011).

Regardless of parenting philosophy, consumption is a necessary part of parenting and all mothers are purchasing products to meet their children's needs, due to their changing lifestyle. With more online influence than ever before, mothers are finding out about products and services to meet their needs through online promotion and word of mouth from other mothers.

### **3 Marketing to mothers and the online influence**

In the marketing literature, considerable focus on marketing to children is present (see for example Chaplin and John, 2007 and Beder, 1998, among others). The influence children place on their parents' consumption is known (Beder, 1998) and furthermore, from the age of eight, children make the majority of their own purchasing decisions (Raphael, 1993). Therefore, when considering the buying behaviour of mothers and their child-related purchases, it would generally be worth considering the mothers of children aged under eight years of age.

Academic research has indicated the important shift into parenthood and how the journey to parenthood is becoming commoditised, with tourism organisations targeting parents-to-be (Voigt and Laing, 2010). The shifting lifecycle stage has developed a new target segment for organisations to reach out to in relation to a variety of products such as baby related purchases (prams, cots, bibs and baby clothes) (Clarke, 2004; Layne, 2000), vacations and maternity items such as clothes and body care (Voigt and Laing, 2010).

Academic research, therefore, covers a broad range of parenting related topics. however there is no consideration of the virtual community influence between parents. The use of message boards and social media to facilitate brand-related messages has been addressed in the academic literature in depth. Secondly, the consumption of goods by parents and the marketing process to parents has been addressed in the literature. Despite this, no attention has been focused on the influence of virtual community use by mothers and how this influences consumption. Industry data indicates the huge buying power of mothers online.

Due to the lifestyle changes of a new mother, and the desire for friendships with other mothers, a number of online communities exist, targeting parents. In the US, sites such as

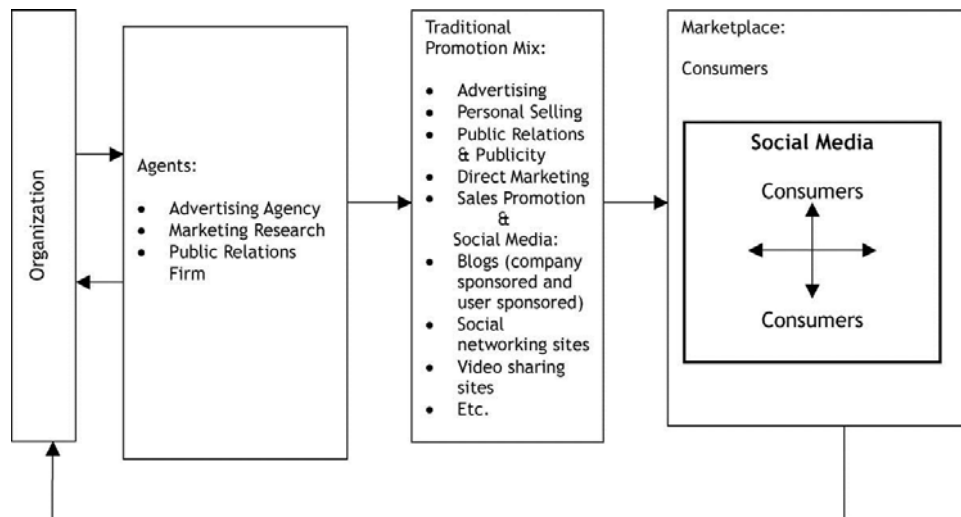
Baby-Zone.com and Babycenter are frequently cited as popular, while, in The UK, Mumsnet is a well patronised site. Within Australia, Babycentre and Essential Baby are some of the sites most utilised. According to Mangold and Faulds (2009) “these sites provide various types of information for mothers and parents, along with opportunities for interaction through message boards, forums, and chat rooms. Companies that can benefit from communicating with moms may want to have their employees contribute to the conversations that are occurring there, under conditions of full-disclosure” (p.361).

#### 4 Social media and virtual community use

Virtual communities are defined as “groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organised way over the internet through a common location” [Ridings et al., (2002) p.273]. While social media is broader than virtual communities, virtual communities form one part of social media. Virtual communities can meet in commercially established sites, such as Amazon.com, in common-interest sites, such as Essentialbaby.com.au, or on discussion boards established on social media sites such as Facebook.com. Virtual communities, therefore, can be researched within the context of social media research or more specifically by examining just virtual community research. For this study, broad social media literature was researched, and more narrowly, research on virtual communities was considered.

While there is an absence of academic literature relating to the consumption and influence of mothers, there is considerable literature relating to social media and the impact of word of mouth. Mangold and Faulds (2009) indicate that communication has changed with the shift in reliance from traditional media to social media. Figure 1 indicates their new communications paradigm.

**Figure 1** The new communications paradigm

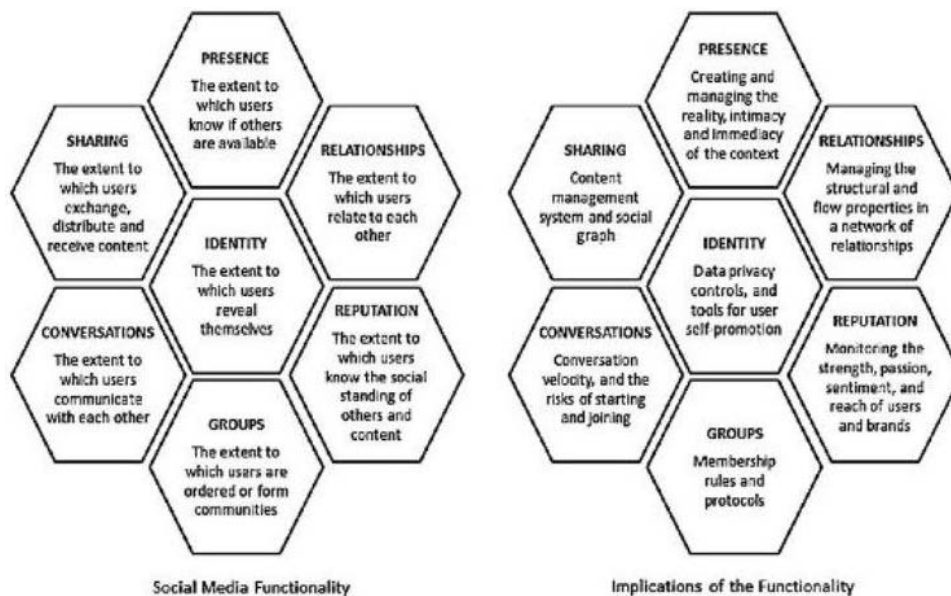


Source: Mangold and Faulds (2009, p.360)

Figure 1 indicates that the traditional media are still being utilised with agency led communication, however social media is communication between consumers and consumers and this increases credibility in communication. As these consumers are being marketed to, they also promote to other consumers, thus providing the valuable and credible word of mouth that contributes towards buying behaviour.

Similarly, an overall view of social media was Kietzmann et al.'s (2011) 'Honeycomb of social media' (see Figure 2). This provides a relevant perspective on social media, when considering social networks of mothers' groups.

**Figure 2** The honeycomb of social media



Source: Kietzmann et al. (2011)

Figure 2 indicates the functionality of social media in terms of some key areas: identity, presence, relationships, reputation, groups, conversations and sharing. While these functions occur in an offline group context, such as a traditional mothers' group, the online focus results in increased implications for the functionality. Online communities provide a space for open communication and contribute toward strengthening trust, because "Consumers like to network with people who have interests and desires that are similar to their own. Organizations can leverage this desire by creating communities of like-minded individuals. These communities can center on shared interests and values" [Mangold and Faulds, (2009) p.361]. The like-minded nature of the members of the community means that social media is a powerful platform for encouraging purchasing behaviour, as trust is present and conversation contributes to trust.

The Attachment Parenting community is a powerful example of the ways that online networking connects communities with shared interests and values. For example, in her paper that examined the Attachment Parenting community in Walthamstow, UK, Talbot (2013) argued that social media overcame issues with social isolation and loneliness among mothers. Similarly, Gattoni's (2013) dissertation examined how women who were

in the process of transitioning into motherhood accessed social media and Web 2.0 platforms to learn about parenting practices. These practices included child-led parenting and experiences advocated by the Attachment Parenting community.

The users in any community build relationships and groups through their use of social media (Kietzmann et al., 2011), and these relationships result in a co-creation between users. Two-way communication can enhance commitment and trust (Briones et al., 2011), benefitting all parties. However, there may also be a cultural capital element to the connections developed as mothers seek to reinforce the dominant social and cultural paradigm (cf. Brock et al., 2010). Thus, for mothers who are intensively involved in purchasing the right products, social media can reinforce valued cultural capital through “verbal exchanges, of delighted comments ... and practical activities” [Brock et al., (2010), p.1045]. Social media use is popular for varying reasons relating to social connections with new and existing contacts. One main reason is the fact that informal conversations can take place between friends, colleagues, business partners, and other contacts (Zhao and Rosson, 2009). Zhao and Rosson (2009) categorise these into two types of benefits: relational benefits, such as common group and connectedness, and personal benefits, such as useful information related to a user’s personal interests or goals. Drivers for stimulation of a virtual community have been categorised as leader’s involvement, level of offline interaction (face to face contact), usefulness and finally, IT infrastructure (Koh et al., 2007). Any social media strategies also need to consider mobile strategies for smart phones and tablet computers, such as iPads, as this is where the social media audience is increasingly logging in from (Kaplan, 2012).

Users’ personalities contribute to the way people interact on social media sites (Golbeck et al., 2011), thereby contributing to the culture of the site. McNab (2009) states that social media users want to contribute to discussions and add value to the sites. Users of social media sites are seeking ways to participate and make a contribution toward the site’s culture, progress and success. Over time, established community norms or ‘rules’ come into play, language is established, and a culture grows through time. Because of the importance of word of mouth in consumer-to-consumer communication, some brands develop an online strategy aimed at increasing word of mouth. A social media strategy is beneficial for an organisation (Universal McCann, 2009), as it can enhance relationships between organisations and stakeholders (Briones et al., 2011). As a result of the loss of control over the messages (Mangold and Faulds, 2009), the credibility of the message could be perceived as being higher, just as credibility of word of mouth exists. Users tend to trust their networks, rather than marketers (Universal McCann, 2009); therefore, the user input into social media sites contribute to building credibility for the message and, ultimately, for the brand. This credibility has been in transition through the use of social media, as over a decade ago, trust was higher for static newspapers online and lower for online magazines and television shows with user input and interactive conversations (Kioussis, 2001). While researchers have explored the motivations of virtual community users (Ridings et al., 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004), the establishment of virtual communities by commercial businesses (Blanchard and Markus, 2004), life cycle (Alon et al., 2004), trust (Abdul-Rahman and Hailes, 2000) and even the social capital of knowledge sharing in virtual communities (Chiu et al., 2006; Chan et al., 2004), limited attention has been paid to the consumption behaviour caused by word of mouth on non-profit oriented sites. Furthermore, no attention has considered the use of these sites by mothers and the impact on consumption.



## 5 Trust and the reference group

In more traditional consumer behaviour literature, an understanding of reference groups exists. Tendency to conform is one aspect of reference group behaviour that influences the consumer's likelihood of following group-sanctioned recommendations (Clark and Goldsmith, 2005). Tendency to conform is associated with consumer susceptibility to normative interpersonal influence and lower self-esteem (Clark and Goldsmith, 2005). Receiving product-based recommendations may vary from active information searching to observation (Park and Lessig, 1977). Trust results in motivation to share knowledge between community members (McAllister, 1995) and researchers have addressed how this transfers to an online context (Hsu et al., 2007). As online communities are usually established between people who do not know one another face-to-face, trust takes some time to be established and this can impact on motivations to share content until the community is more established. Extant literature on reference groups online indicates the importance in understanding motivation for communicating word of mouth messages. In a virtual community setting, four challenges occur: communication, motivation, leadership and technology (Koh et al., 2007).

## 6 Method

Connecting the literature on motherhood, lifecycle stages, consumption, reference groups and also the knowledge of virtual communities, the main research question for this exploratory study is how does online influence impact on the shopping behaviour of mothers?

In order to determine online influence, parents in a public online community were observed over a two year period. This follows a netnography process (Kozinets, 2010), where research planning, data collection and interpretation was considered in a structured way. This enabled the researchers to obtain data that was relevant and detailed, in an unobtrusive way. During the observation period, notes were kept about the discussions and promotional messages shared between the members. After the researchers had developed knowledge about the community, the members were then asked to discuss how other mothers online had influenced the child-related purchases they had made. Participants could select whether they wanted to join in the study, thus there was a self-selection bias. This bias means only those who felt they had something to contribute would answer the question. All respondents had one or more children, aged under eight years of age, based on the finding that children over the age of eight make many of their own purchasing decisions (Raphael, 1993). As a preliminary study, 39 responses to the post were analysed.

All the women participating in the study were members of a baby/parenting forum and many of them also participated in a smaller group of women with babies due or born at the same time as them. These smaller groups are called 'due-in-groups' (or DIGs). The DIGs are joined by women whilst they are expecting a baby and often have a relatively small number of members (approximately 30–100 members). Regular conversations are held during the pregnancies, birth announcements then start to become a major part of the group and then the group continue their interactions once the baby is born and growing up. As a result of the ongoing interactions and smaller group size, trust and friendships

are built. Some women report travelling to visit other women within their DIG, for example. The 39 respondents varied in age and number and age of children, however all had at least one child.

Rich qualitative data was provided by respondents and manually analysed through the use of thematic analysis. The use of qualitative analysis facilitates the analysis of the experiences of mothers in contemporary, Western cultures. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that good case study research contains a “substantial element of narrative” which is “often a sign that the study has uncovered a particularly rich problematic” (p.237). The use of a case study reveals a large quantity of information about the case because, as Stake (1995) has argued, the role of case study research is to understand the phenomenon and the associated “political, social, historical and especially personal contexts” (p.17) that surround the case under inquiry. Thus, the use of a case study approach in this study facilitated the analysis of the experiences of a group of mothers in relation to their uptake of marketing communications.

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a foundational, qualitative method. Its benefits include its flexibility that is not meant to imply an ‘anything goes’ mentality, a criticism Braun and Clarke (2006) seek to challenge. Rather, as Guest and McLellan (2003) note, it is focused on identifiable themes and patterns in conversations. It can be used to develop a conceptual framework of the themes that are present in multiple instances of a case (Ward et al., 2009). It is often used by researchers working in nursing, education and marketing. As qualitative analysis requires the synthesis and analysis of large quantities of often transcribed, spoken text, a thematic analysis is useful to negotiate the interplay between the data collected at interview, the semantic themes evident in that data and the conceptual framework on which the study is reliant (Guest and McLellan, 2003).

The site is a public site and analysis for academic purposes has been conducted in the past. Although ethical clearance was granted from the University Ethics Committee, respondents to the post were not informed that it was to be utilised for academic purposes, as it was believed this could influence the responses to the post. This follows the ethics guidance of netnography (Kozinets, 2010) and the approach taken by similar web-based community studies (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). Furthermore, as no identifying details are provided, analysis of the publicly available responses were considered ethically sound. The researchers are participants on the site, which enabled them to make structured observations over a relatively long-term time period.

## 7 Findings

Analysis on the findings will be broken down into categories: influence of the DIG; trends; knowledge regarding new products; consumption to solve problems and finally product trials. Finally, there was a discussion about the recommendations of products that did not work for the respondent.

### 7.1 The influence of the DIG

Many talked about the influence of women in their ‘due in group (DIG)’. The relationship with others in the DIG seemed to provide a greater level of trust than any

other online forum, perhaps due to the similar age groups of the child and the time spent getting to know one another in a more intimate setting. For example, one mother stated:

“(I purchased) The Wonder Weeks app. I read about it in my DIG and we downloaded it and have had a lot of fun with it. I also bought a ‘doppler’ app, back when I was pregnant (thanks to the women in my DIG), but had no success with hearing the baby’s heartbeat!

There’s a midwife/doula on eBay who makes predictions about your baby’s sex, due date, hair and eye colour etc. and a group of us in the DIG got these predictions. It was great fun seeing how accurate they were (or were not). And whenever Pumpkin Patch, Target, Big W, Kmart etc have a sale, the DIG women are on it ... and my wallet gets a little thinner!

So the women in my DIG are very responsible for a lot of my shopping!”

This respondent has received numerous suggestions and purchased products accordingly. Some products were not taken seriously, such as the birth prediction, however it is important to consider her words that the group are ‘responsible for a lot of my shopping’, indicating the impact of recommendations on her consumption behaviour.

## 7.2 *Trends*

A focus on trends and collective shopping behaviour was evident. For example, a discussion of the rather ‘trendy’ teething toy, Sophie the Giraffe, was discussed. One woman indicated that it was a hit in her online mothers group:

“I wish I had shares in Sophie the Giraffe when our MG got into them. I think we collectively bought about 50!”

In a similar vein, even the responses to the question itself resulted in purchases. One mother indicated that she quickly purchased a Sophie the Giraffe teething toy after reading the post about online shopping. Another Mum stated that she purchased ‘waterproof pants – great for outside play when it’s been a bit wet’ and a number of mothers hurriedly looked online to see what these pants were and subsequently purchased them, as indicated below:

“I just bought the mudlark crawler pants because of this thread! Never heard of them before, but SUCH a good idea.”

and

“I too am currently looking at the Mudlark website because of this thread ... can’t decide what to get. Does anyone have specific recommendations?”

and

“I’m a shocker. I just bought a Mudlark Jacket each for my 2 youngest children.”

## 7.3 *Knowledge regarding new products*

For many of the mothers, online influence led them to discover a product they may not have heard of otherwise. This impacted on consumption in many cases:

“MCN’s. (Modern Cloth Nappies/Diapers). That’s about it. Discovered them on another forum when I was first pregnant, investigated them, bought them,

tried them, loved them, still have some sitting in my closet! I'll use them again for my next bub too."

Another example:

"I bought our first wrap carrier after a suggestion from another mum, also cloth nappies. I'm sure there's many things but they are the two that stick out the most."

Finally, another similar example:

"Pram accessories, drink bottles, sipper cups, lip balm and random stuff on sale haha."

The discussion of special offers and sales was a common theme and when the group were alerted to a promotional event, their likelihood to purchase increased.

#### *7.4 Consumption to solve problems*

In addition to general product purchases, when problems arise, the women utilised the forums to seek advice and support, including product related tips. For example, one mother stated:

"(My son) was a wee little lad when he was born due to IUGR (inter-uterine growth restriction) caused by my pre-eclampsia. He was born at the start of winter and I wanted to carry him around to keep him warm and cosy and be able to chase around after toddler (daughter), too.

The Ergo with newborn insert was too bulky for constant around-the-house use so I was recommended the Sleepywrap by members here on (the forums). Best thing I ever bought!"

As indicated in this quote, a particular reason for getting advice led this mother to a particular purchase. This was a common theme, whereby women would actively seek information for a problem they needed to solve.

#### *7.5 Product trial*

Some mothers indicated that receiving a product as a gift or even winning it in a competition through the virtual communities could influence their shopping. For example, one mother said:

"I won (my swaddle) in an EB competition when we were TTCing (trying to conceive) and thought it looked weird. It sat in the cupboard, but once we had the baby and realised he slept with his arms up, the swaddle was just perfect for him. He has worn one every night since! I was thinking how I might not have got one had I not won it, and we've since bought a lot of them. But actually many of the women in my DIG have discussed them and raved about them, so I possibly would have discovered them that way."

Another mother indicated that borrowing an item influenced her shopping:

"The Mei Tai (baby carrier). I borrowed one from a mother in my DIG and (after using it) was sold on it!"

These responses particularly indicate the relevance of product trial on consumption and although recommendations and testimonials may result in consumption, in some situations, product trial may be required.

Some mothers also indicated that purchases for their own use were made after having a baby, based upon recommendations from other mothers. These products were generally related to lifecycle stage changes, due to becoming a mother. For example:

“A GHD hair straightener. My hair totally changed texture after having my first child. That coupled with all the new hair growth (that no one told me about!), I needed some serious help styling my hair. Was recommended by another mum in MG.”

Similarly, major household purchases were discussed. A cooking device, a Thermomix, retailing at approximately \$2,000 was mentioned being purchased due to other mothers online in order to cook for the family. Another mother stated that “I paid out a small fortune for (post-birth) Weight Loss Surgery after a discussion on here”.

### *7.6 Dissatisfaction with recommended products*

While most women discussed items they had been happy with, there was some purchases which were not useful for the family:

“I bought a Woombie (one of those swaddle sleeping bags) from an EB recommendation and it was useless. Should have stuck to my own wrapping technique which I went back to and saved myself \$50.”

Similarly, other issues with recommended purchases existed, where they did not fit in with the family requirements:

“We bought a bumby (sic) seat, on the basis that other mums from my MG (Mother’s Group) were raving about it. Took it back a week later. Not a winner for me.

Also, when I was pregnant with DD2 (Daughter 2), I was constantly being told how I would need a double pram for the baby and toddler. So, we did end up buying a 2nd hand double pram. Sold it 2 months later (at a profit!)”

Overall, the analysis indicated that there was a great deal of influence in the online mothers groups, and in particular in the DIGs. While some reports indicated that the purchases were not useful to the family, others were particularly happy with the purchases. As one mother indicated: “yes (the site) influences my shopping on some things, but it’s what you also want and need that you have to consider.” Mothers may have a shared frame of reference, but with different needs, it is important to consider the particular needs of the mother and family, when making purchasing decisions.

## **8 Discussion**

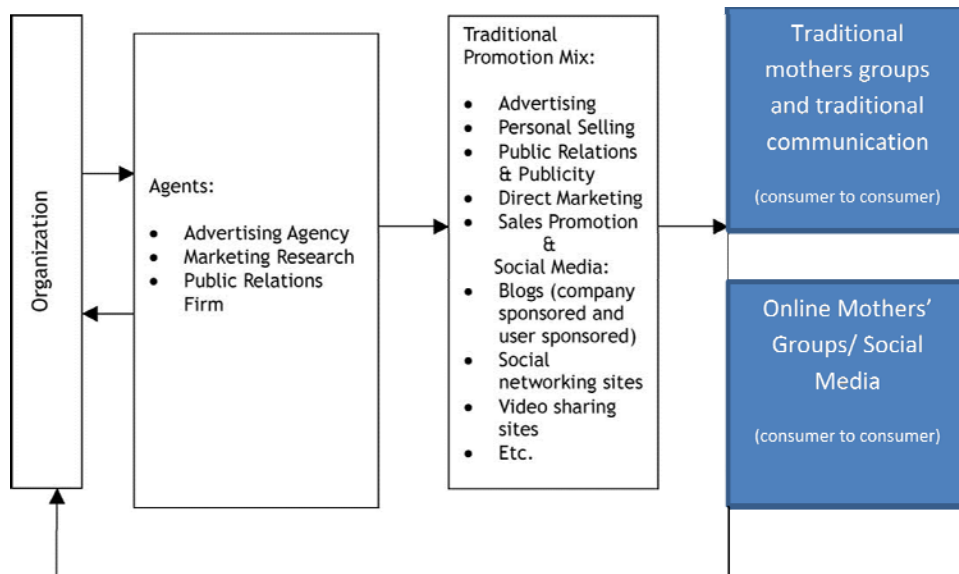
The results have highlighted the influence of word of mouth between mothers in a social media context, through discussion forums and other social media pages. Considering the literature on consumer decision-making and reference groups, conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of the qualitative data.

Firstly, it was evident that word of mouth existed. In some cases the mothers were actively seeking out information, whilst in other cases they were passively observing posts or participating in posts which included a product recommendation, impacting on consumption. This links in with early reference group literature (Park and Lessig, 1977), however there was no indication of this being a tendency to conform. This does not support the views of Clark and Goldsmith (2005). Rather than this being a tendency to conform or even linked in with lower self esteem, it appears that the consumption behaviour was strongly linked to a perceived usefulness of the product recommended. Mothers are willing to buy products that offer their family a clear benefit and were dissatisfied when the consumption resulted in a non-useful product. The findings were analysed in key themes:

Influence of the DIG; trends; knowledge regarding new products; consumption to solve problems and product trials, as well as dissatisfaction with recommended products. It is evident that many product recommendations were not looked for by the respondent, except in the event of a problem that needed to be solved.

Figure 1 was previously discussed, focusing on how traditional media and social media can be utilised to communicate with consumers. Based on this study of the use of online discussion boards by mothers, this model has been adapted and is included in Figure 3.

**Figure 3** The new communications paradigm in a mothers' group context (see online version for colours)

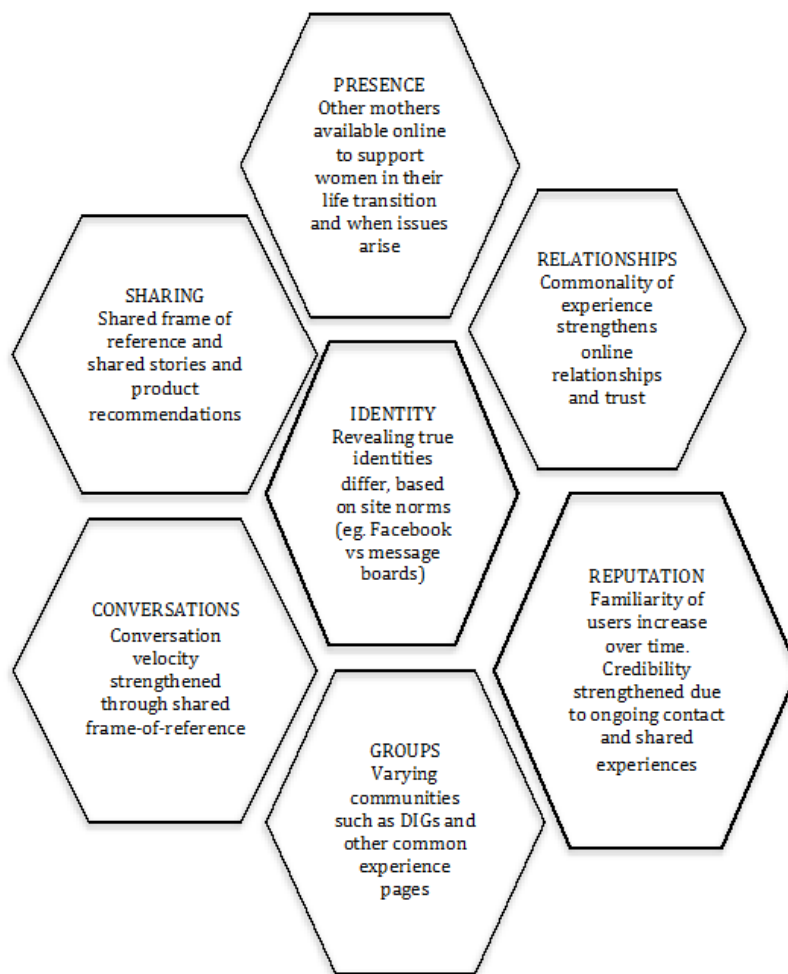


Source: Created for this paper, based on Mangold and Faulds (2009)

As indicated above, communication between consumers can be undertaken in a traditional face-to-face environment or between users in an online context. The mothers reported that they were still communicating with other mothers in a face-to-face context, but the influence online certainly impacted on buyer behaviour. It is not surprising that social media makes a contribution toward the buying behaviour of its users. In the

context of mothers and online mothers groups and communities, however, the surprising finding is how influential other mothers are on the buying behaviour of these groups. Through repeated interactions over time, trust is established and this trust and the similar frame of reference contribute toward the buying behaviour influence. This is why the DIGs are particularly relevant towards the buying behaviour, as the frame of reference is shared at the same time. This is indicated in the adapted honeycomb of social media, as indicated in Figure 4.

**Figure 4** The honeycomb of social media within a mothers' group context



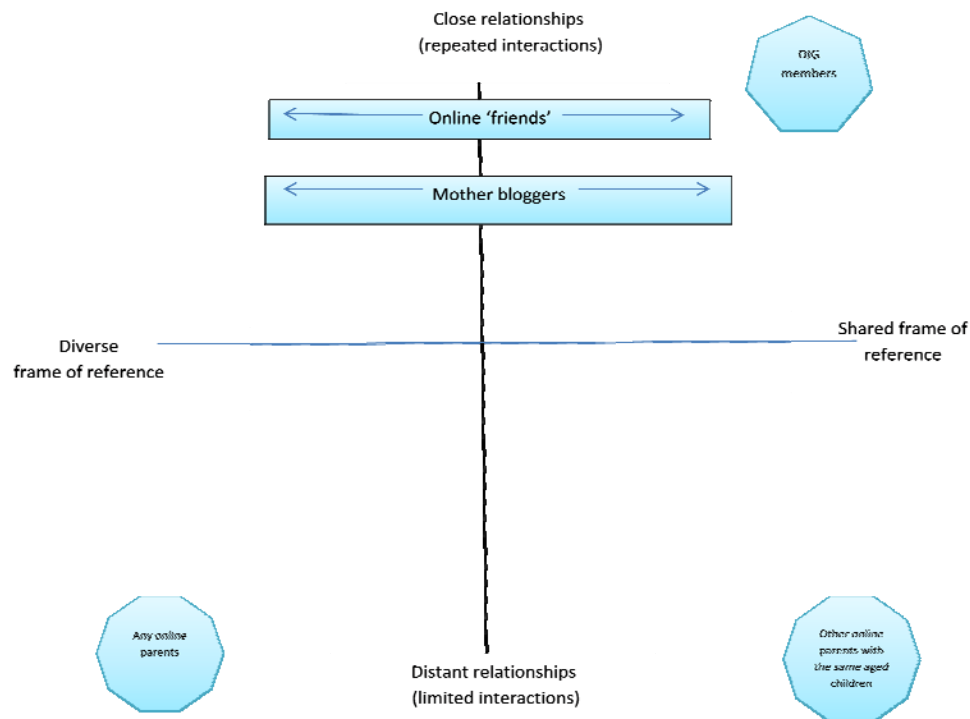
*Source:* Created for this paper, based on Kietzmann et al. (2011)

Figure 4 is an adaption of the work by Kietzmann et al. (2011) and indicates how the online communication mothers are undertaking provides an influence on purchasing behaviour, primarily through the shared experiences and interactions building trust and credibility between the women. The results indicated the impact of DIGs and shared frames of reference in impacting on what they purchase. Furthermore, trust is established and strengthened through repeated interactions.

A number of theoretical implications arise from this research, in terms of trust and online community power. In the context of the mothers' group, fostering word of mouth is essential. Recommendations from other mothers are more powerful than any structured promotion and mothers are utilising social media to establish and strengthen relationships. The use of this social media then impacts on consumption behaviour. This replicates previous studies about credibility of word-of-mouth, but within a new context, that is, that of mothers online.

When considering mothers online, it is important to note that the closeness of the relationship, through ongoing interactions, and the shared frame of reference, such as children the same age or the number of children, leads to an increased degree of reliance and trust in the suggestions. Based on the findings of this study, figure five proposes a model of the different types of relationships between mothers in virtual communities. It is also interesting to note the ways that shared cultural capital influence their online interactions.

**Figure 5** A framework for analysing online relationships in virtual communities: the case of the online mother's group (see online version for colours)



Source: Created for this paper, based on data analysis

As indicated in the proposed framework above, the frame of reference and the ongoing interaction is important in the establishment of trust and trust varies, based on the interaction and frame of reference. Further exploration of this framework is necessary. The framework might also benefit from a closer examination of the ways that shared cultural capital among mothers in a DIG influence purchasing behaviour. As Brock et al. (2010) have noted the use of DIGs suggest the women have command of the cultural



capital necessary to interact successfully with others in a group with shared experiences. Similarly, as Shirani et al. (2011) found, consumption decisions are related to what they termed concerted cultivation that is, at least in part, culturally determined. The DIG appears to be a vital place for women to exchange their cultural resources to ensure the development of the cultural capital necessary to be a good mother by consuming the right products.

Several managerial implications arise from this research: Firstly, marketers should recognise the contribution the mothers groups make toward purchases. In particular, marketers should consider the reference group behaviour of mothers online. It is particularly important to note that mothers build trust in smaller groups and through repeated interactions, rather than with all mothers in general. Although one mother is more likely to trust the views of another mother, there is a higher degree of trust with mothers of children the same age. Whether this is due to the repeated interactions or because of the shared frame of reference is unknown. Furthermore, trial of products (through friends, competitions or trial initiated by a marketer) may increase product purchases. This is in line with the adoption of new products framework (Rogers, 2003) and is important for marketers to consider.

## **9 Limitations and further research**

Although the data collected was rich in its contribution, there were some limitations with this study. Firstly, the relatively small sample. While the size of the sample is less relevant in qualitative research than it is in quantitative research, it still provides a limitation. Methodologists such as Gall et al. (2005) have argued that the methods of qualitative research allow for broad, complex, interconnected aspects of a research problem to be considered in the context of the data analysis process. Thus, while the sample sizes are often smaller, the use of qualitative data allows researchers to understand a phenomenon broadly, beyond an intrinsic interest in one instance of the problem under inquiry (Stake, 1995, 2005). Furthermore, only online comments were used and no further probing of comments was undertaken. It would be useful, for example, to understand some of the comments in more depth, such as why the women liked or disliked a particular item and whether this would influence their trust of the community in future. Further research could be utilised to expand this sample size and representation, perhaps through the use of focus groups or semi-structured interviews, enabling the research the opportunity to probe for further information. Similarly online diaries and reflections relating to their online behaviour and purchasing habits would provide relevant data.

As the interaction between mothers in virtual communities is under-researched, recommendations for further research can be developed through the findings presented in this paper. While this exploratory study has made a contribution toward understanding the online influence of mothers on other mothers, it has raised new topics for further research. Researchers could explore:

- How applicable is the proposed framework for analysing online relationships in virtual communities in varying contexts?
- How does disposable income of mothers influence their online influence and purchasing decisions?

- How does an unsatisfactory purchase, recommended through an online community, influence future purchase-related recommendations?
- Why are mothers more likely to trust the views of other mothers with children the same age? Is it more familiarity and therefore increased trust, or is it due to the shared frame of reference?
- How do parenting styles impact on consumption, such as products purchased and recommended and the impact of recommendations on consumption?
- How does the mother's 'frame of reference' impact on purchasing decisions (for example, their sexuality, profession etc)?
- Comparison of sharing in a traditional mothers' group versus an online mothers' group.
- What is the difference between working mother and Stay at Home Mother's use of social media? And how does this impact on shopping behaviour?
- How does the child influence the mother's shopping behaviour, in an online context? How does this vary based on age of the child?

This paper has presented an analysis of literature relating to social media and also to buyer behaviour, while also providing data on the online behaviour of mothers. Mothers represent a large market and influence one another with word of mouth, online. The qualitative study has indicated some of the ways mothers have been influenced by other mothers online. This study has provided questions for further research.

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